Please meet my adviser, the computer

Here's a topic that seems perfect for a Woody Allen movie: a computer program that serves as an on-line business adviser.

It's not hard to imagine Woody lying on a couch, baring his neurotic soul to the computer. But funny as this sounds, there are, in fact, several programs on the market now that serve as a sort of "business analyst" to help you handle face-to-face business situations.

Are you skeptical? Not half as much as I am. Many of these programs, I've found, aren't worth their weight in plastic. But I found one that has been received so well, I decided to give it a test run.

With the program, called The Sales Edge (Human Edge Software, list price $250 for IBM PC and compatible computers), you first answer questions on the screen about yourself and your sales prospect, and then the program tells you how to tailor your sales presentation to his/her personality and needs. It even suggests various "closing techniques" to fit the situation.

A psychological profile

Here, in brief, is how it works. For a more complete review, write to me at the address below.

The Sales Edge has three parts, in which you assess yourself, assess your would-be customer, and put both together into a sales strategy. The program begins by asking whether you agree or disagree with a series of statements, flashed on the screen one at a time.

Some examples: "I like to take charge of situations." "I am somewhat impulsive." "I work for others around me rather than myself." "I easily accept substitutes." Not unlike the psychological profile tests we've all taken. This takes about 10 minutes and the results are stored in a file called "my.slf." Then you go through a similar process of answering questions about your prospective customer. The two sets of answers are combined later by the program.

With the customer, you are asked to agree or disagree with a series of traits that are listed on the computer screen: Do you agree or disagree that the prospect is talkative, methodical, concerned, ambitious, sarcastic, a risk taker, etc.?

So far, you've spent about 15 minutes with the program, and you're ready to receive a sales-strategy report that uses the information about yourself and the customer.

Each report is composed of six sections, and is displayed either on your screen or on your printer. Some sample excerpts:

✔ What to expect — "The two of you are opposites in many ways. He prefers to be alone and is not interested in people while you are a very social person whose primary interests lie in the social realm . . . Unlike you, he does not like excitement and change. You may feel frustrated when he thwarts your efforts to interact socially. Watch your tendency to become angry in response to this . . . "

✔ How to succeed — "Expect your customer to be prepared. He is the type of buyer who will buy from the salesperson who analyzes his needs and fulfills them to his benefit . . . Put business before pleasure . . . Expect him to drive a hard bargain, but don't take his bargaining acts and tendency to take a firm stand to mean that a win-lose contest is on. Bear in mind that people who engage in hard bargaining are more apt to buy than those who do not . . . "

✔ Opening Strategy. "Emphasize business. Control and limit your ability to be very social and friendly; instead, focus on his needs . . . "

You also get advice for presentation and closing strategies; in my case, the program went so far as to suggest an "order form close": It suggested making notes on the order form during the presentation, and then simply having the customer approve the order at the end.

Sound methodology?

The program is slick, but, of course, the question is, how sound is its methodology? I started out rebelling against the whole idea that people's personality types could be neatly pigeonholed, and that it was possible to devise formulas that dictate optimum human behavior. Even if it were possible to do so, how do we know how accurate the formulas actually are? What if programming shortcuts were taken that result in simple-minded behavior?

Also, what if your statements about yourself are not accurate and those about your customer are based on too little information? Put the two together, mix in a bit of faulty reasoning on the part of the programmer, and the result could be a bit farfetched. Why not use a horoscope — it's cheaper and you don't need a computer.

But on reflection, it seems apparent that all the program does is what we all try to do when going into a one-on-one situation, that is, set off our strengths and weaknesses against the traits of others, and adjust our behavior accordingly. Thus, the key test is whether the program provides enough usable advice to justify its cost.

I introduced The Sales Edge to six sales people, and all agreed with me that it meets that test.

In short, I think The Sales Edge is well worth $250 — especially in larger organizations, where it might be shared by many people.

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